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To what extent does culture create language learning in terms of proxemics?

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine whether the English teachers' perceptions of proxemics, which is a frequently ignored but crucial part of non-verbal communication, vary from that of American people because of their native cultures. With this aim, they were provided with 60 multiple choice questions with pictures illustrating different proximities and asked to choose the most appropriate options for the given situations. The participants were chosen depending on purposeful voluntary basis and consist of 37 English teachers. 28 of them have been exposed to different cultures by going abroad and 19 of them by taking special courses on culture. They were native speakers of Turkish and learned English as a foreign language. The obtained data was evaluated by calculating mean scores and applying one sample t-test, independent samples t-test and ANOVA in SPSS 22. Depending on the findings, it was discovered that females, those who had been abroad, taken culture courses and higher educational degree tend to have slightly higher scores. It can be deduced that non-native English teachers should be encouraged to have higher education, go abroad and take culture courses.

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1. Introduction

Despite the increasing number of researches on the fields of language learning and culture, only few of them aim to figure out the extent to which culture creates language learning, especially from the aspect of proxemics. Hall (1963)

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maintains that unlike much of the traditional matter of anthropological observations, proxemics patterns are maintained largely unconsciously when they are once learned. Hence, it is very likely that non-native speakers of a language will have different perceptions in terms of proxemics which makes this topic necessary to be studied.

1.1. Theoretical background

1.1.1. Culture

Culture has plethora of definitions. Brown (2007) describes it as ‘... the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time.’ Adding that it is literally more than its parts. (p. 188). He argues that culture is literally more than its components. Due to the impact of culture, individuals have a tendency to perceive the reality within the context of their own culture which results in a ‘created’ reality rather than the empirically defined one. It brings about the liability for us to consider that our reality is the correct one.

Brown (2007) maintains that what makes culture significant in second language learning is that culture is a part of a language and a language is a part of culture. For this reason, second language learning is the same as the acquisition of a second culture. What Kamhi-Stein (2009) claims about the non-native English speakers’ (NNES) teacher education programs are similar to Brown’s ideas. According to him, the teachers serving in different countries or continents are likely to face unique points of views and be influenced by different opinions or expectations. Therefore, it can be deduced that the teachers’ instructional practices are affected by the local context.

Apart from the widely accepted belief that culture is a significant factor in language learning, Han (2004) regards the lack of acculturation leading to lack of exposure to the L2 input, which brings about fossilization. Similarly, Genç and Bada (2005) argue that teaching L2 is not complete or accurate if culture is not studied. It is necessary for the L2 learners to have knowledge of the speakers of the target language or the country where the target language is spoken to make the language learning meaningful. In addition, they emphasize that learning a new language should not be underestimated as consisting of the manipulation of syntax and lexicon.

1.1.2. Proxemics

The term proxemics is firstly coined by Edward T. Hall, and defined as “the study of how individuals unconsciously structure microspace-the distance between men in daily life, the organization of space in houses, buildings and ultimately a layout of towns.” Hall began the study of proxemics by using systematic observations when it became apparent that people from different cultures interacting with each other do not always attach identical meaning to the same or similar measured distances. (Hall, 1963). Therefore, a need to figure out the differences between the perceptions, awareness and reactions of individuals with different cultural background occurred.

Although it is generally the verbal communication we focus on during the teaching and learning of a language, Brown (2007) emphasizes how much information we transfer nonverbally. What Hall (1966) suggest to be a ‘silent language’ is called as nonverbal communication by the other researchers, who see proxemics as an aspect of this silent language. Hall (1968) defines proxemics “...as the study of man’s perception and use of space.” and adds that the use of space varies from culture to culture, by mentioning about his own personal experiences, in which he confronted with a number of difficulties regarding the use of space, emphasizing that people stood so close to each other and stepping back is interpreted as American’s being cold, disinterested or aloof. The apparently inconsequential differences in spatial behavior and perception resulted in misunderstanding and even serious culture shocks. Spencer et al. (2002) clarifies the issue of pragmatics as concerned with the study of meaning that linguistic expressions receive in use. Therefore, the use of proxemics can also be regarded as a part of pragmatics. Hedge (2000) defines the pragmatic competence as knowing how to use language in order to achieve certain goals. That is why it is crucial to know the proxemics rules of the target culture for language teachers.

Hall (cited in Baldassare and Feller, 1975) divides the human use of space into three parts as *fixed feature*, *semi fixed feature* and *informal space* (interpersonal distances). As for the categorization of interpersonal distances, Hall (1966) uses four different categories as intimate, personal, social and public distance. Intimate distance is a term used for a distance from touching to eighteen inches and which is characterized by poor vision and increased perceptions of heat and olfaction, whereas personal distance ranges from arm’s length to twelve feet where the vision is not blurred anymore, vocalizations increase and people communicate at approximately an arm’s length. In social distance,

individuals communicate at a distance at which only visual and auditory sensory inputs are perceived, whereas in public distance, the voice shifts to higher volumes and eye contact is minimized. Pease and Pease (2006) point out that these acceptable distances are learned by the age of twelve. The proxemics distance types for the American citizens are as follows: 45 cm for intimate space, between 45 cm and 120 cm for personal space, between 120 and 360 cm for social space and finally 360 cm to 760 cm. The following figure illustrates these distances:

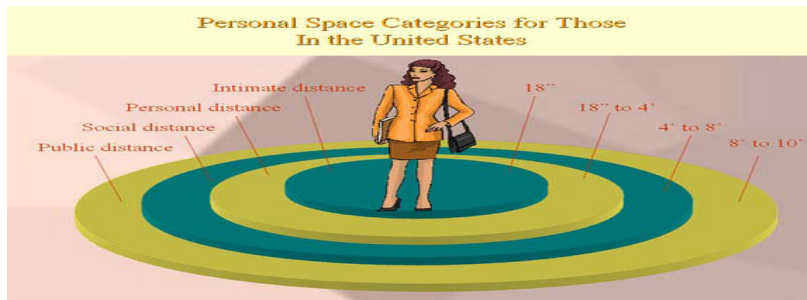


Figure 1. Adapted from http://home.comcast.net/~marvaallen/KP/Verbal-Nonverbal/00_Verbal-Nonverbal.html

Pease and Pease (2006) emphasize that these acceptable distances vary depending on a number of cultures. For instance, in some cultures, the intimate distance is just 20 to 30 cm. Gender, crowd, being assumed to be threatening and social roles determine these distances. While it is acceptable for our doctors and hairdressers to be given permission to enter our intimate space, it cannot be permitted for a stranger. A similar case is true for pets, which are given permission to enter individuals' intimate space as they are not regarded as threatening. These territories are described in the following picture:

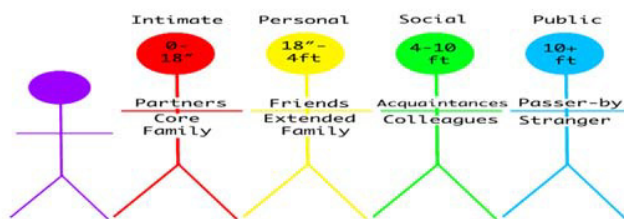


Fig. 2. Adapted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expectancy_violations_theory#/media/File:Proxemics.png

Axtell (1998) exemplifies the unspoken but widely known rules of proxemics with the help of an elevator context, stating that whenever someone gets on an elevator, s/he is likely to face the door, to have a posture which makes him/her seem thinner and taller and to avoid touching someone unless the elevator is too crowded, in addition to the tendency to look upwards. He points out that breaking these implicit rules of proxemics creates tension. (Pease and Pease, 2006)

The cultural differences, however, are obvious in many aspects of proxemics, like touching. The findings of Knapp and Hall (1997) are also in line with these claim, revealing that American people tend to touch each other twice as much as Japanese people do in public, leading us to the distinction between *contact* and *noncontact* cultures. Contact and noncontact cultures also differ greatly. In other words, what is acceptable in one contact culture may not be appropriate in another one (like two males holding hands). Despite the fact that cultures are categorized as contact and noncontact, some controversial issues still exist. For instance, as for the Arab culture, it is not suitable to touch someone from opposite gender despite their having a highly contact culture. On the other hand, this type of interaction

is regarded as normal in the United States, which has a noncontact culture. A similar example can be Chinese culture, in which it is normal for the schoolboys to hold hands during a conversation in spite of having noncontact. In some Western Cultures this may be seen as homosexual behavior where it is not seen this way in China. (Carnes, 2010).

2. Methodology

2.1. The statement of the problem

As it is widely known, communication comprises nonverbal messages as well as the verbal ones. Despite the verbal ones are relatively well-known, the lack of non-verbal communication strategies and varied perceptions of these messages through the L1 transfer of the cultural knowledge can result in misunderstandings and communication breakdown. Whereas the comprehension of verbal messages requires less effort due to being overt, the opposite is true for non-verbal communication. (Brown, 2007).

Non-verbal communication competence and its performance is one of the most crucial components of the foreign language learning. The extent to which the language learners are able to utilize the strategies of proximity determines the extent to which the interlocutors are capable of comprehending the speakers of the foreign language. It is also fundamental in determining the appropriateness of the given messages depending on the culture. On the other hand, the language teaching in Turkey seems to fail to raise the explicit awareness of proximity in other cultures. In other words, not every university has special courses on “culture”. Therefore, the requirement to discover whether the English language teachers in Turkey are able to achieve competence in terms of American proxemics norms without any special education or experience of living abroad on proxemics occurs.

2.2. Research questions

This study basically seeks answers for the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the proximity perceptions of Turkish ELT teachers differ from the proximity norms of American people?
2. Do the proximity perceptions of Turkish ELT teachers differ depending on their gender?
3. Do proximity perceptions of ELT teachers differ depending on their experience abroad?
4. Do the proximity perceptions of Turkish ELT teachers differ depending on whether they have taken any special courses on culture?
5. Do the participants' success in proximity perceptions of the native speakers of English differ depending on their degree?

2.3. The participants

The participants are chosen by purposeful voluntary basis and consists of 37 English teachers. 28 of them have been exposed to the target culture by going abroad and 19 of them by taking special courses on culture during their educational life. They are all native speakers of Turkish and have learned English as their foreign language. There are 25 females and 12 males in the sample. 6 of them have bachelor's degree whereas 16 of them have MA degree or ongoing MA studies and 15 of them have PhD degree or ongoing PhD education. The age of the participants range from 24 to 35 with a mean of 28.5.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Gender	Age		Degree		Culture course		Experience of going abroad		
Male	12	Lowest	24	Bachelor's	6	Yes	19	Yes	28
Female	25	Highest	35	MA/ongoing MA	16	No	18	No	9
		Mean	28.5	PhD/ongoing PhD	15				

2.4. The data collection instrument

The data collection instrument is a questionnaire developed by the researcher and consisting of 2 parts, the initial part asking for personal information and the second part aiming to figure out the English teachers' perceptions related to proxemics. For the initial part, the teachers were asked to fill in their ages, department, experiences of staying abroad (place and length of stay) and whether they have taken any special courses on culture. As for the latter part requiring responses to the multiple choice questions, the teachers were expected to evaluate the given pictures according to their own proximity perceptions. The data collection instrument is also evaluated by four native speakers of English, revealing that the theoretical information about proxemics provided in the books which the study is based on are mostly in line with their perceptions of proxemics.

2.5. Procedures and data analysis

Each response of the participants to each item in the questionnaire was coded as 1 if it is in line with the expected response in the American culture and as 0 if not and then computed. The collected data was analyzed and evaluated by the SPSS 22 by calculating percentages, mean scores and applying one sample t-test, independent samples t-test and one way ANOVA to clearly demonstrate the finding. In addition, the teachers' responses were grouped to be able to define their perceptions from different aspects of proxemics.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Research Question 1-To what extent do the proximity perceptions of Turkish ELT teachers differ from the proximity norms of American people?

The following graph demonstrates the percentages of the correct responses.

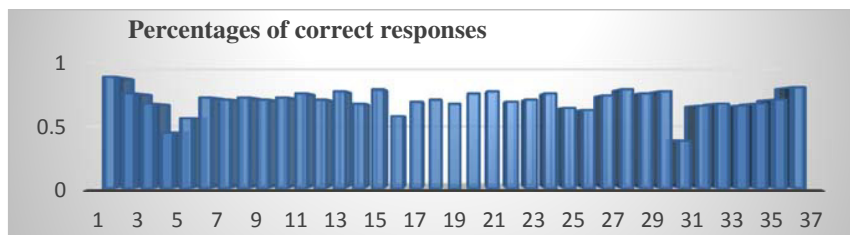


Fig. 3. The percentage of the correct responses

With the purpose of figuring out whether there is a difference between the expected responses from American people or not, one sample t-test is applied and the findings indicated that a statistically significant difference exists between these responses. ($M=70.6486$, $SD=9.58650$, $df=36$ and $Sig.=.00$). This finding supports the claims in the literature review part, which suggest that proxemics is basically determined by the culture in which the individuals grow up and being competent in the verbal aspect of the language is not adequate to be a successful communicator or fully comprehensible for the interlocutor in the target language. Taking into consideration that language learning is highly related to culture (even learning a language is learning a culture), more steps should be taken to facilitate the acculturation process of the ELT teachers as they are also responsible for the teaching of the target culture and language. Another reason for providing ELT teachers with intercultural communication competence is to avoid fossilization both in teachers and in learner, as Han and Odlin (2004) maintain.

Table 2. One sample t-test results

N	Mean	Std Dev.	t	df	Sig.
Proxemics 37	70.6486	9.58650	-18.624	36	.000

3.2. Research Question 2- Do the proximity perceptions of Turkish ELT teachers differ depending on their gender?

Table 3. Independent Samples t-test results illustrating the impact of gender on the perception of proximity

Gender	N	Mean	Std. dev.	t	df	f	Sig.
male	12	64.6667	12.59389	-2.2885	35	9.074	.005
female	25	73.5300	6.21906	-2.304	13.640		

The independent samples t-test conducted to find out influence of gender on the perceptions of proxemics revealed that there is a statistically significant difference between the perception of males ($M=64.6667$) and females ($M=73.5300$) in terms of proxemics, females outperforming males. ($\text{Sig.}=.005$). The findings of this research question is in line with Parker and Loe's research, (2011) which demonstrated a significant difference among the genders despite the limited data collected. The underlying cause of this finding is likely to be the fact that females are better in language learning due to greater number of meta-cognitive strategies they apply during their interaction (Seifoori, 2014; Radwan, 2011). However, the findings of Sarıçoban and Öz's (2014) research carried out with the participation of pre-service English teachers could not determine meaningful difference in the intercultural communicative competences of the participants.

3.3. Research Question 3- Do proximity perceptions of ELT teachers differ depending on their experience of abroad?

Table 4. Independent samples t-test results demonstrating the relationship between the experience of staying abroad and perception of proxemics

experience abroad	N	Mean	Std Dev.	t	df	f	Sig.
yes	28	72.2500	6.73094	1.852	35	8.417	.006
no	9	65.6667	14.95828	1.279	9.064		

As the independent samples t-test given above demonstrates, there is a statistically difference between the performance of the participants' performances who have been abroad and have not been abroad, those who have the experience of staying abroad ($M=72.2500$, $SD=6.73094$) outperforming in terms of giving closer responses to those expected from native speakers than those who have not been abroad ($M=65.6667$, $SD=14.95828$), ($\text{Sig.}=.006$). These findings shed light on the significance of being exposed to another culture in order to develop intercultural knowledge. The higher rate of success in perceiving proxemics the way the native speakers do may stem from the fact that gathering input from other cultures increases both the knowledge of and the tolerance of other cultures, leading to regarding native culture in a way more identically to the target culture.

3.4. Research Question 4- Do the proximity perceptions of Turkish ELT teachers differ depending on whether they have taken any special courses on culture?

Table 5. Independent samples t-test results presenting the relationship between the experience of staying abroad and perception of proxemics

Culture course	N	Mean	Std Dev.	t.	df	f	Sig.
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Yes	19	70.6316	6.39627	-0.11	35	1.985	.168
No	18	70.6667	12.30017	-.11	25.260	1.985	

The independent samples t-test conducted to find out the impact of taking a special culture course on determining the proximity perceptions of the native speakers of English failed to figure out a statistically significant difference between those who have taken a culture course and those who have not. Despite the fact that the individuals are provided with the theoretical aspects of cultures during the courses based on cultures, it is obvious from the findings that the impact of the cultures are not sufficient to be regarded as significant.

3.5. Research Question 5- Do the ELT teachers' proximity perceptions differ depending on their education levels?

Table 6. Tukey test results to illustrate the relationship between the participants' education levels and their perceptions of proxemics

Subset for alpha = 0.05			
	degree	N	1
Tukey HSD ^{a,b}	bachelor	6	68.6667
	MA	16	70.6875
	PhD	15	71.4000
	Sig.		.806

The Tukey test results presented in table 5 revealed only a slight difference between those who have bachelor's degree (68.6667), who have MA degree and ongoing MA education (70.6875) and who have PhD degree or ongoing PhD education (71.4000), reflecting that the higher the educational level, the closer the responses to those of the native speakers of English.

Table 7. One-way ANOVA results to illustrate the relationship between the participant's degree and their perceptions of proxemics

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	32.062	2	16.031	.166	.847
Within Groups	3276.371	34	96.364		
Total	3308.432	36			

Although the Tukey test determined a slight difference between the proxemics performances of the participants depending on their education level, the one-way ANOVA test findings determined no significant relationship between the participants' educational backgrounds in terms of having Bachelor's degree, MA degree or PhD degree. (Sig. = .847). Depending on the findings, it is possible to state that having Bachelor's, MA or PhD degree causes a slight difference on how individuals regard the proxemics aspect of the target culture, despite the fact that it is not statistically significant.

4. Conclusion

Though the sample in this research is too small to make generalizations about the proxemics perception of Turkish ELT teachers, it can be stated that their responses reflect the difference between the perception of American people and Turkish ELT teachers. Considering that perception of proxemics highly bound to the cultural background, the main underlying cause of the language teachers' perceiving proximity differently than the native speakers of the target language is likely to be language transfer. Language transfer of the language learners are affected by a number of factors and Ellis (2008) lists them as the linguistic proficiency of learners, cultural transfer (socio-linguistic rules of their L1), accommodation theory (convergence/divergence), impression management, learners' preference, to be more transparent, overgeneralizations and the learners' preference to maintain their ethnic identity or their wish to establish

a separate identity as an L2 learner. The reason why the ELT teachers failed to develop the cultural aspects of proxemics for the target language may stem from their tendencies to transfer their cultural background knowledge. In addition to the language transfer, Odlin (1992) points out another possible reason of discourse errors as overgeneralization. Therefore, it can be deduced that the reason of errors in perceiving the proximity in the provided pictures can be the overgeneralization of the proxemics rules.

The fact that teachers do not have a common point of view in terms of determining the infelicities about proximity and deciding on which ones are appropriate does not mean that they are not aware of the linguistic structures; in contrast, this finding may result from the fact that they are not completely familiar with the actual communication situations in the target culture. Therefore, they may lack the ability of deciding which proximity is the best one in which situation. The precaution to be taken by the English teachers in this sense is that they should be exposed to the actual language use contexts and culture as much as possible. The similarity of their score in proxemics indicates that they have a linguistic knowledge which should not be underestimated. On the other hand, their proximity choice greatly differs, proving that some of them have a lack of familiarity with the proxemics knowledge in the foreign language. Further research can be carried out to shed light on the difference between native and non-native speakers of English by applying additional data collection techniques. Thus the comparison of the two groups can provide us with better understanding of this issue on condition that the variables are controlled well enough.

As another possible way of developing the knowledge of proxemics among non-native teachers of English, the culture courses can be more commonly taught in the departments dealing with language learning and teaching and the content of these courses should be meticulously designed. The courses should also include such non-verbal aspects of language like proxemics.

5. Suggestions

Because the research only reflects the participants' perceptions, not their actual performances, another study can be carried out through the use of photographs taken unconsciously and the limits of intimate, personal and social distances can be determined for Turkish people, whose culture is not a non-touch culture, which makes it different from the American people's culture, which is non-touch.

The findings can be more trustworthy if the findings are supported by structured interviews or with the help of experimental abstract situations. (For instance, asking the participants to arrange the objects far apart, side by side or next to each other and to comment on their distance). Another way of achieving this can also be the analysis of lexicon.

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